

## Profiling for school leadership improvement and development in Tonga

Seu'ula Johansson Fua, *Institute of Education, The University of the South Pacific*

### Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to share findings from a research study on the leadership practices of school principals and leaders in Tonga; and the processes used to turn the findings of the study into a profile for leadership development.

In 2011 and 2012 a total of 125 school leaders participated in a nation-wide research study that profiled the practices of Tongan school leaders from Early Childhood Centres, primary schools and secondary schools. The process also included a validation process that included participation by the national teachers' training college and senior education administrators from government and non-government systems. *Talanoa* was used to collect the data from school leaders, and this data was complimented by a quantitative questionnaire that involved over 500 Form 5 students across Tonga.

The results from the *Talanoa* showed that Tongan school leaders valued Ethical Leadership, particularly relational skills, over and above other dimensions of leadership. The overall findings of the study identified 5 dimensions of educational leadership for Tongan school leaders, which included: Ethical leadership; Visionary leadership; Organisational leadership; Instructional leadership; and Community connectedness.

The profile of Tongan school leaders which is a direct outcome from the study is a first for Tonga and no other similar work has been sighted emerging from other Pacific nations. The Tonga profile of school leadership has been used by the Tonga Secondary School Leadership Program as a basis for conducting a baseline study on school leadership practices and as a tool for professional development.

### Social cultural context

Leadership in Tonga has traditionally been the business of Kings and Nobles, where leadership is inherited, ascribed and associated with clans and land. The literature on traditional Tongan leadership is plenty and well documented. Traditional leadership is also still very much a part of Tonga's socio-economic and political scene and continues to have an influence on Tongans' conceptualisation and practice of the business of leadership.

With the introduction of Christianity, modern government, and through the vehicle of education, there has been a steady emergence of church leaders, statesmen and middle class commoner leaders in the last 50 years. Initially, these positions of leadership were taken by aristocrats, and in more recent time, a steady growth of commoner leaders has been evident. With the emergence of commoner leaders in the church, government, businesses and in the communities, also came challenges for commoner leaders relating to leading in a traditional kinship- and land-based society. The literature on political events in Tonga is well documented and this paper will not attempt to explore it further here.

At the turn of the 21st century, a series of political events occurred that brought to light underlying tension between old beliefs about leadership, new beliefs about traditional and contemporary leadership, as well as the complexities of a changing society. In 2005, the civil servants led the largest and longest civil strike in Tonga's modern history. This civil strike affected hundreds of students as their teachers left the classrooms to 'sit in' at Pangai Si'i (a park next to the Royal Palace on Nuku'alofa's waterfront) during the days of the civil strike. For the first time in our history, children and students saw their traditionally respected teachers 'revolt' against the order of the day. In a traditional society where relationships, compliance, obedience and supporting the greater good were valued, the civil strike of the 2005 gave Tongan students a shocking illustration of 'disobedience'. A year later, in 2006, on the 16th of November, buildings throughout Nuku'alofa burned as a result of political



tension between the government and the pro-democracy party.

The effect of this riot further drove an already weak economy into a crippled state. I remember clearly seeing Nuku'alofa soon after the burning, as I am sure many other Tongans remember these dark days. I wept for Tonga. In an effort to appease the growing tension amongst the civil servants and the pro-democracy party, the government were forced to increase the salary of civil servants. The effect of the increase in the civil servants' salaries and a burned down capital forced the government to adopt a massive civil servant redundancy in 2007 and 2008, as part of a cost cutting measure. Unfortunately, the impact of the redundancy saw many experienced teachers leave the classroom for good.

During this this troubled decade, Tonga also saw "the sun set" twice on the island Kingdom, with the passing away of the architect of modern Tonga, King Tupou IV in 2006, and the prince of change, King Tupou V in 2012. However, a new sun has arisen, and a new era begun, with the ascension of King Tupou VI to the throne. Also, during this short time span, Tonga elected its first democratic government in 2010, seeing a new line of ministerial leaders elected by the people and installed by the monarch.

Recently this year (November 2014), Tonga has gone to the polls again to vote for the 2nd democratic government, and in 2015, Tongans will join the celebration of the coronation of His Majesty King Tupou VI.

There is a sense that things are finally beginning to turn, but in what direction, is still not clear. However, the impact of the troubles of the early 21st century is evident in the economy and in our education system. A way forward is still shrouded in the mist of the new morning.

## Literature & Methodology

Literature on Tongan educational leadership is quite recent and has been minimal, but with steady growth in the last decade (Kavaliku, 1966; Paongo, 1990; Vete, 1990; Fua, 2001, 2003, 2012). The original use of the Profile for leadership development was put together by Leithwood and Montgomery in 1988. The tool was further developed by Begley et al. in 2008, and it has been used in Australia, Canada, Russia, Hong Kong and now Tonga by my work in 2012. The use of profiling as a professional development tool is supportive of Prestine and LeGrands' (1991) work on cognitive development.

The research study involved all island provinces throughout the Tonga group, with school leaders involved from early childhood education, primary schools and secondary schools. In a way, this research study was a baseline, in trying to identify a national conceptualisation of leadership for educational leaders. Given the opportunity, all island provinces were invited to join with all school leaders participating in the study. A total of 125 school leaders were involved in the research study's qualitative component. The *Talanoa* research tool was used as it was believed to be the most culturally appropriate tool for gathering data in this context, and particularly given the limited data available on educational leadership for Tonga. An additional 500 students at Form 5 level (10% of national population at this level) completed a closed questionnaire.

The analysis process involved identification of major themes and patterns, which subsequently became the key dimensions and sub-dimensions of educational leadership for Tonga. Additional analysis was conducted in sections of the data where it was difficult to map or draw connections between sub-dimensions and progressions within the sub-dimensions. Reference was made to international work on profiling to assist with this analysis.

After the initial mapping of the key leadership dimensions and sub-dimensions, it was evident that, as Tongans, we were confident about some of the dimensions of leadership. However there were other areas that were weak. In particular, very little was known about Organisational leadership and Instructional leadership. As such, a series of *Talanoa* sessions were organised as a way to validate and revise the mapped dimensions.

The validation process also included educators from the Ministry of Education and from the national teachers'



training college. The validation process was necessary, even critical, given the identified gap in the mapping of dimensions and sub-dimensions. For validation of the analysis a series of consultations were held with a number of experienced educational leaders. This further refined the layout and mapping of the key dimensions of educational leadership for Tonga.

## Findings

The study, for the first time, documented specific dimensions and sub-dimensions for educational leadership in Tonga. Earlier works highlighted the need for educational leadership development in organisations and for training, but this study brought a focus on what educational leadership actually means for Tongan school leaders in our contemporary context.

With results from this study, we can now be more assured in our talk about educational leadership in Tonga. Discussion is now possible relating to the five key dimensions identified; “Ethical Leadership”, “Visionary leadership”, “Organisational leadership”, “Instructional Leadership” and “Community connectedness”.

One of the key findings of this study is the clear priority that Tongan educational leaders give to “Ethical Leadership” over and above that of other leadership dimensions. In the dimension of Ethical Leadership, Tongan educational leaders clearly showed the importance of relationships to the role of a school leader. This of course concurs with Tonga’s highly stratified and kinship-based society where relationships are critical to socialisation and everyday behaviour and language. As relationship building is a key factor in Tongan society, for a leader, behaving appropriately is important in maintaining and building such relationships.

In the study, educational leaders were very forthcoming in sharing beliefs and experiences about professional ethics for an educational leader. One of the more interesting debates during the validation process was the discussion on the place of Christian belief in the performance of educational leaders. There were those who believed that emerging educational leaders should already be demonstrating a Christian way of life. Others believed that the most experienced educational leaders should have the wisdom of an experienced Christian.

The current profile of educational leadership for Tonga clearly reflects the time, the context and the current climate for educational leaders in Tonga. The leadership dimensions presented in this paper are a reflection of the present, and are open to change and adaptation as time takes its course and Tongan educational leaders adapt and grow in their role.

In summary, the key dimensions and sub-dimensions of school leadership for Tonga are shown in the following Table.

Table 1. Summary of key dimensions of school leadership for Tonga

Key Dimensions of School Leadership	Sub-dimensions of School Leadership
Ethical Leadership / Fakafeangai tonunga `a e taki	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Professional ethics</li> <li>2. Decision making processes</li> <li>3. Problem solving</li> <li>4. Relationship building</li> </ol>
Visionary Leadership / Sio Atu	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Managing change</li> <li>2. Setting directions</li> <li>3. Vision development</li> </ol>
Organisational Leadership / Taki `i ha Potungaue	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Policy, regulations, laws</li> <li>2. Financing education</li> <li>3. Organisational planning</li> <li>4. Organisational communication &amp; information</li> </ol>



Instructional Leadership/ Papa Fakahinohino	1. Student learning & development 2. School plan 3. School finance 4. Professional development for teachers 5. School culture
Community Connectedness/ Fengaue'aki	1. Parents (PTA) 2. Churches, education committees, advisory boards, ex-students & other stakeholders 3. Cultural competency

## Application

Findings from the research were translated into a profile for leadership development. A profile is a two dimensional table/matrix which outlines the key dimensions and sub-dimensions, with associated descriptors of behaviours illustrating the stages of developmental growth within each dimension.

The identification of the dimensions, sub-dimensions, and the stages of professional growth have been gathered during a series of workshops, conversations and the sharing of both international literature and local experience in school leadership.

The original 'principal profile' produced by Leithwood and Montgomery (1986) was based on extensive literature review and field validation. Since then, other profiles have been produced using other approaches. Begley and associates (2008) took a more grounded research methodological approach giving more weight to local practitioners' knowledge and experience. Principals' profiles have been developed in other countries including: Western Australia (1989); the Canadian Province of Ontario in 1993 (with updated editions in 2000, 2002 and 2006); the Canadian Northwest Territories in 1993; Pennsylvania in the USA in 2005; Sweden in 2005; Karelia in 2000; Belarus in 2003; and Hong Kong in 2000.

In all these profiles, there is obvious commonality in the dimensions of leadership that practitioners believe to be essential to improving school leadership, particularly the dimensions of "Instructional Leadership". The use of profiles agrees with research (Prestine & LeGrand 1991) on the use of cognitive apprenticeship processes as a useful tool for leadership development. Through this process of using the profile, school leaders have an opportunity to reflect on their own practices and critically engage with the functions and roles of leadership practices. The profile is also an opportunity for school leaders to focus on more positive and aspiring practices and to define what is the "ideal", rather than the usual focus on the "problem".

## A leadership profile can be used for several purposes

1. A school leadership team can use the grid as a tool to identify and agree on ideal practices that can assist them in improving a particular aspect of their leadership. For example, a school may be struggling with consistent student under-achievement and wishes to improve its Instructional Leadership as a way of improving student learning. Table 1 shows that instructional leadership is a dimension that has five sub-dimensions; one of these sub-dimensions is teacher professional development. The school leadership team may then decide to focus on improving access to, and planning of, a teacher professional development program. As a group, they can decide on the range of practices that will demonstrate best practice in this area. By working together on a profile, the school leadership team can build consensus on what they agree is suitable, relevant and worthwhile for their school context. What is also important here is that the profile is owned by the school and that the practices that they commit to are based on their values, experiences and reality.

2. As an individual school principal, one can also use the profile to self-assess, set goals and monitor one's own professional leadership development. It is often a good idea also to have a mentor to support the individual school principal in working through such a profile.



3. A profile can also be used as a way to create and produce professional development materials for school leadership. The process can be seen as action-research, using a range of methods including workshops and Talanoa, with the intention of gathering ideas about best practice from practitioners. Each dimension and associated sub-dimensions can be developed as a learning and teaching module on its own.

The profile has been recently used in a number of projects in Tonga and around the region, including the following:

- The University of the South Pacific's Professional Certificate in Education Policy and Planning program for module EDP01 Educational Leadership.
- The Tonga Secondary School Leadership Project's use of the leadership profile for evaluative purposes, and as a mentoring and training framework in their work with secondary school teachers in Tonga.
- The Pacific Literacy and School Leadership Project has used the Tonga leadership profile to guide the creation of a leadership matrix for the profiling of school leadership and literacy leadership in Tonga, Solomon Islands and in the Cook Islands.

Provided in the Table below is a presentation of one key dimension – that of “Ethical Leadership”, with its associated sub-dimensions and the growth strands that demonstrate progression from basic to more advanced performance. A particular characteristic to note about the profile is the use of Tongan words to describe each stage of the progression. *Potopoto a niuui* refers to the characteristics of a young coconut tree which has just sprouted from the nut, while *Poto'i faiako pule* refers to a skilled school leader, and *Faiako pule ma'a Tonga* refers to a school leader for the community and for Tonga. The description of the progressions recognises that leadership is a journey of growth, and values each part of the journey. It purposefully avoids using numbers to rank – and thus discourage – potential ranking of school leaders' performance. Also included in the profile is a column that provides comments explaining the rationale for the progression. This is done as part of being transparent about the analysis of the data.

### **Ethical leadership**

When Ethical Leadership is displayed, the school leader comprehends and skilfully demonstrates Tongan core values and professional principles for school leadership when anticipating, interpreting and responding to ethical issues related to the school and its surrounding context.

Table 2. Key dimension of leadership: Ethical leadership

Sub-dimensions	Potopoto 'a Niumui	Poto'i Faiako pule		Faiako pule ma'a Tonga	Comment
PROFESSIONAL ETHICS	Honesty – Faitotonu Fairness – tatau ki he tokotaha kotoa Love – 'Ofa Humility – angafakatōkilalo Knows individual capacity, values, responsibilities and context Talanoa & Fanongo	Recognises others' perspectives & values Patience – fa'a kataki Speaks well – lea lelei, loto lelei Motivates others Trustworthiness	What is best for everyone – seeing the bigger picture Takes risk and is able to learn from mistakes Team player, working together Talitali kakai lelei	Role models for others – lea moe ngaue; ta sipinga lelei Work ethics support vision and are demonstrated clearly and consistently i.e. lives the vision of the organisation Loyalty – ngaue mateaki, mamahi' i me'a, Ongo' i e fatongia, anga faka'apa'apa Maturity and wisdom – angai poto, poto fakapotopoto Holistic lifestyle – healthy body, mind and spirit	Progress from practices that display personal and Tongan core values towards meta-values of the organisation. Progress from occasionally demonstrating values to being a living role model demonstrating both Tongan core values & organisational meta-values Progress from the individual good towards the collective good Demonstrates Christian/spiritual maturity
PROBLEM SOLVING PROCESSES	Problems are solved on a case by case basis Problems are referred to higher authority	Has a process for solving problems – assesses the problem and prioritises cases Gathers information that is valid, timely, relevant & can apply it to problem solving Solves problems in a timely manner Considers each case according to each situation	Problem solving process includes consultation with the school leadership team and with people involved in the problem Problem solving process considers consequences of action to various people	Strategic – mohu founa Problem solving process is adaptive to the context/ island community	Progresses from solving problems by an individual to a shared process. Progresses from a linear, single-dimensional process to more dynamic, contextual & multi-dimensional process
DECISION MAKING PROCESSES	Knows & understands regulations, law & policy Follows regulations, laws & policies Makes decisions based on available resources	Decisions and regulations follow a purpose/ vision Has a process for making decisions Decisions are timely & responsive Gathers information that is valid, timely, relevant and applicable	The decision-making process is shared Decisions are based on consensus agreement	The decision-making process is interpretive & contextual Decisions are decisive – once made they are firm decisions A transparent decision-making process Decisions are based on consequences & clear principles	Progresses from strict adherence to policy regulations to interpretation of policy. Progresses from an individual making the decision to a shared decision-making process Progresses from decisions based on individual personal values to consensus values to consequences to philosophical ideals
RELATIONSHIP BUILDING	Establishes relationships with students, teachers, parents	Relationships are maintained, re-enforced and engaged with students, teachers & parents	Relationships with students, teachers & parents are guided by core Tongan values (mamahi' i me'a, lototo, faka'apa'apa, feveitokai'aki) & professional ethics. Establishes relationships with other key stakeholders in the school	Relationships are authentic, engaged, meaningful and reciprocal with immediate and other stakeholders that work together for the school and the surrounding community	Progresses from superficial relationships to authentic relationships – that is, guided by values Progresses from relationships that are centred around the school to those with the wider community



## Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has outlined for Tonga the key dimensions of educational leadership and the associated sub-dimensions and its expected enactment. This is a first attempt for Tonga, and although it is a recent study, in the space of 2 years the value of the application of the profile to a number of contexts and purposes has been evident. The Institute of Education wishes to engage in more research of this nature, where data is analysed and turned into tools that can be used effectively in our schools to bring about change. All too often, research around the region remains as written up journal articles or reports that collect dust. At the Institute of Education, we have learned through years of experience and engagement in development work, that researchers need to translate their data into practical and useful tools for practitioners. Without any further work to translate research findings into practical tools for practitioners, we can only pay lip service to making "evidence based decisions" in the Pacific.

The Tonga leadership profile remains open for dialogue, for critique and for further development to remain useful for educational leaders in the Pacific.

## References

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